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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AFGHANISTAN'S ISTANBUL CG COMMENTS ON
AFGHAN-TURKEY, AFGHAN-US, AND AFGHAN-IRAN ISSUES

REF: ANKARA 1917

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Afghan CG in Istanbul Azzim Nasser-Zia said his biggest challenge is dealing with smuggled Afghan citizens. Some pay up to USD 10,000 to be smuggled from Afghanistan through Turkey to Europe; most are caught before entering the EU. Turkish police send up to 600 such Afghans a month to his Consulate; Nasser-Zia helps them return to Afghanistan. He said the Afghan community in Turkey numbers some 60,000, a mix of permanent residents and professionals, legal temporary workers, and illegal migrants. Nasser-Zia welcomed Turkey's leadership of the Afghan-Turkey-Pakistan Trilats, and called Turkey a more "trustworthy partner to Afghanistan than Iran or Russia." He urged the USG to pay more attention to the plight of the Afghan people, urging that the USG cease airstrikes in Afghanistan and instead focus on cutting off Taliban support from Pakistan. He warned that Iran's presence in western Afghanistan is "dangerous" and growing, with Iran sending thousands of tribal Hazara (Shia) Afghans to live in Herat province. He said that Afghanistan's fall 2009 elections will be a positive step "if they are free, fair, and democratic." Nasser-Zia urged the international community to focus counter-narcotics efforts on giving Afghan farmers modern farming and irrigation equipment to allow them to grow high-profit substitute crops like pomegranates and saffron.
End Comment.

Afghans in Turkey

¶2. (C) Nasser-Zia, Afghanistan's Consul General in Istanbul since August 2005, met with Consul General on November 12, offering a tour d'horizon of his work in Istanbul, focusing on Afghan refugees and migrants, and his views on Afghan-Turkey, Afghan-Iran, and Afghan-US relations.

¶3. (C) Nasser-Zia described the main focus of his work as dealing with the scores of Afghans a day -- on average 600 a month -- detained by Turkish authorities as they try to travel through Turkey to enter Europe illegally. Most have paid smugglers up to USD 10,000 per person. That fee includes guarantees of a return plane ticket to Afghanistan if they are caught en route and of up to three attempts to try to smuggle them to Europe. When such Afghans are caught in Turkey, Turkish authorities bring them to Afghanistan's Istanbul Consulate, where Nasser-Zia allows them to call "relatives" (comment: the smugglers) in Afghanistan. The "relatives" then send return tickets to the Consulate, where Nasser-Zia turns the tickets over to the detained Afghans, who are then allowed to fly home. Nasser-Zia sees many of them coming back a second or third time. He estimates that 90% of the "first-timers" are caught before they can enter Europe. Nasser-Zia emphasized his limited sympathy for them,

pointing out that if they can raise USD 10,000 to pay a smuggler, they could have raised the same money to better their lives in Afghanistan. Moreover, those who attempt the travel subject themselves and their families to miserable and dangerous conditions, and sometimes face tragic deaths when boats capsize or trucks fall down precarious mountain passes.

¶4. (C) The Afghan community in Turkey numbers some 60,000, according to Nasser-Zia's rough estimate. He described four main groups of Afghans here: (1) A small minority of long-term residents, some of whom are dual-citizens, who have lived and worked in Turkey for a generation or longer. (2) Temporary residents, who have legally received a three year renewable Turkish work and residency permit; this is the largest group; (3) Refugees and migrant workers trying to live here. They tend to lie low, find work, and stay for at least a few years. They are usually of Turkic origin and thus can speak the language and integrate into the grey market well. (4) Afghans passing through Turkey en route to Europe, usually relying on smugglers.

Afghan relations with Turkey, Iran, and the U.S.

¶5. (C) Turkey: Nasser-Zia welcomed Turkey's leadership of the Afghan-Turkey-Pakistan Trilat process and the GOT's willingness to host the most recent Trilat meeting in Istanbul on October 30. President Karzai, "an old friend I've known since he was 20", came to Istanbul for the Trilats and for the subsequent World Economic Forum meeting (reftel). Nasser-Zia complained that the Afghan MFA failed to inform

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him of Karzai's plans to attend until October 28, giving him two days' notice to find hotel rooms for the 30-person delegation. Afghanistan finds the Trilat process very helpful, though "more so when Musharraf was President of Pakistan", because he had more authority to deliver on pledges to Afghanistan than does "the so-called democratic government in Islamabad now." Pakistan's new leadership makes it "all the more important that Turkey" drive the Trilat process. He said Afghanistan looks forward to the upcoming Trilat Summit scheduled for early December. Nasser-Zia described a long history of Turkish-Afghan diplomatic ties (e.g., Afghans fighting side-by-side with Turks at Gallipoli; the Afghan King being the first monarch to visit the Turkish Republic; etc) and said that even now, Turkey's troops deployed in Afghanistan are attacked much less often than any other NATO forces. Nasser-Zia described Turkey as a far more "trustworthy partner to Afghanistan than Iran or Russia."

¶6. (C) U.S. and NATO: Nasser-Zia urged the USG to pay more attention to the plight of the Afghan people. Most Afghan people felt the USG in past years had ignored them and focused too much on Iraq. Nasser-Zia said that many Afghans are now hopeful that Washington will turn more attention to Afghanistan's internal political and economic development. He also urged that the USG be more careful about the use of airstrikes in Afghanistan, and instead focus on cutting off Taliban support from inside Pakistan. Reinforcing the unfortunate consequences of some Coalition airstrikes on Afghan villages, Nasser-Zia cautioned that the Taliban was intentionally trying to lead the USG to increase such strikes at particularly damaging times, "to make the Afghan people turn against NATO and the US." He explained that when the Taliban learns that a wedding or other village ceremony is taking place it sends fighters near the village and then launches an attack against the nearest Coalition unit, hoping NATO or the U.S. will respond with disproportionate force against the village, causing collateral damage and casualties to the wedding party. Nasser-Zia bemoaned what he calls the USG's over-reliance on technology like Predators and guided missiles, and urged that the USG instead focus on cutting off Taliban support and supplies from Pakistan. "Cutting off the

Taliban from Pakistan would solve over 50% of the problem." He warned that NATO is also not paying enough attention to which local Afghans it is hiring. He argued that corruption is so rife in Afghanistan that even local staff can be bought and turned against NATO and the U.S. "Any Afghan working for NATO is a target for influence by the Taliban or Pakistan."

17. (C) Iran: Nasser-Zia also warned that Iran's presence in western Afghanistan is "dangerous" and growing. He said the Shia population of Herat province is growing fast; now there are "hundreds" of Shia mosques and religious offices there. According to Nasser-Zia, Iran is sending thousands of Afghan (Shia) Hazara tribal refugees to Herat instead of to central Afghanistan where they originally came from. (Comment: Nasser-Zia did not explain how Iran is able to dictate to expelled Afghan refugees which Afghanistan province to return to. End comment.) He described Herat as being once a calm and quiet city, focused on business and culture, but over the past three years it has become dangerously sectarian. "Iran's interest in Afghanistan is to control the west and to inflict pain on America. They don't care about Afghanistan's stability." Nasser-Zia added that even on a professional level he has difficulty dealing with his Iranian counterpart in Istanbul. He said the Iranian CG is constantly seeking him out at receptions, acting "very pushy." Nasser-Zia told us he tries to avoid dealing with Iranian diplomats as much as possible.

Internal Afghan challenges: elections, kidnapping, and narcotics

18. (C) Elections: Asked about Afghanistan's elections scheduled for fall 2009, Nasser-Zia said President Karzai is committed to holding them as scheduled. He asserted that "if the elections are truly free and fair and democratic, it will be good for Afghanistan", implying that he did not think the elections would necessarily be free or fair, even if Afghanistan receives the requisite international funding and support.

19. (C) Security and human rights: Nasser-Zia instead suggested that a more important international and GOA priority should be enforcing security and order throughout the country, which he argued requires a "strong hand" rather

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than a weak democracy. As an example, he explained that Afghanistan has been beset recently by a new phenomenon, kidnapping for ransom. One unfortunate aspect, he claimed, was the involvement of the former Interior Minister. Nasser explained with satisfaction that the former Interior Minister's firing in October and replacement with a new Interior Minister, Hanif Atmar, signals that the GOA will now fight back against the kidnappers. Nasser-Zia predicted that the frequency of such kidnappings will soon decline. Nasser-Zia also defended Afghanistan's use of the death penalty, "even though it is causing big problems with the EU." He claimed that use of the death penalty against those who commit egregious crimes against women and children has lowered such crime rates significantly. "That shows that Afghanistan needs a strong leader and strong rules, to help the Afghan people recover from 30 years of violence, including against each other."

110. (C) Narcotics: Commenting on Afghanistan's other major security challenge, narcotics trafficking, Nasser-Zia asserted that the only long-term solution is to assist Afghan farmers in growing other high-profit substitute crops. He said that in Helmand and Kandahar provinces farmers are trying to grow pomegranates, saffron, roses, and other agricultural "delicacies" that pay high returns as exports. But these are more labor- and water-intensive than poppies. The international community should take more responsibility for training farmers to grow these crops and should focus on

providing more modern farming and irrigation equipment to make such crops viable, he urged.

¶11. (C) Comment and bio notes: Nasser-Zia was a friendly and engaging interlocutor, though we recognize many of his views contrast with official GOA policy. With little prompting he offered up candid opinions on a wide-range of topics, directly but politely criticizing aspects of USG and even GOA policies, in the guise of advice on how the international community can best help Afghanistan. As the grand-son of Afghanistan's last Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, a former aide to Afghanistan's last King, and a former MFA Protocol chief, he projected an urbane, secularized air (e.g., sharing with us that one reason he avoids Iranian diplomatic functions is because he likes to be able to drink wine at receptions). He did not try to hide his view that security and a "strong Afghan hand" are more important preconditions to peace and security than are fall 2009 elections. We understand that the Afghan bureaucracy does not often seek diplomatic or policy advice from its diplomatic staff abroad, and we thus assume Nasser-Zia's influence in Kabul may be limited. Even so, since he has frequent contact with senior Afghan officials transiting Istanbul and given his willingness to share insights into Afghan-Turkey and Afghan-Iran relations, we will stay in contact with him on these and other issues.

WIENER